

Exodus 33:12-23 and Matthew 22:15-22

The other day at a Holiday Village meeting, Sheila brought their adorable little granddaughter, Maeven. A little bashful, Maeven sat on her grandmother's lap and hid her face in Sheila's sweater-jacket...then ever so slowly, she would peek out ...if my eyes caught hers, she would dip back under the protective shield of the sweater. In this wonderful game, as old as creation itself, we smile when children and even some of our animal friends seem to think that if they can't see us, we can't see them!

You surely all have memories of playing peek-a-boo... In our scripture this morning, God plays a game of peek-a-boo with Moses!

Let us be in prayer: Unseen God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together, be acceptable to you, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Moses and God are talking. Moses is in the midst of leading his people, the Israelites, from slavery to freedom. They have had plenty of trials---lack of food and water, the people have disobeyed God's commandments and started worshipping a golden calf made from their jewelry... Moses has had to keep reminding them about their relationship with God.

Kathryn Matthews writes that the people wanted a God they could manage and manipulate; they wanted a thing they could raise up for all to see. And God blasted them for worshipping an idol.

Now some Jews claim that Christians have made "Jesus" an idol...raising his image on the cross and that perhaps worshipping Jesus distracts us from God! This, of course leads to the discussion of *incarnation*...the idea that God *became* Jesus so that when we worship this Christ, we are also worshipping God... Did Jesus want us to worship his image? Or was he pointing TO God through his WAY of love and compassion?

But back to this beautiful little story within a story. Moses longs for confirmation that God is really "with them." It's comforting in a way, to know that even Moses, who had more person-to-God-talks than just about anybody in the Bible, still questioned and wanted to SEE God with his own eyes....

"Show me your ways," Moses cries out. But startlingly, God says, "If you were to SEE me, you would die!" Yikes! How can one SEE the Creative Power of the universe...

how could any of us SEE the power of an infinite love that fills all beings and moves life itself? Perhaps we are only allowed to *see* the reflections....of God.

So, what does our storyteller do when God becomes too vast? He makes God like a human. This is called "anthropomorphism". In this story God has hands and can pass by the rock allowing Moses to only see God's back...Moses gets only a peek at God.

That is what makes God, so intriguing! Imagine if God were *not* mystery, people would surely find ways to use and contain this Divinity, to make God a commodity... and maybe we do this anyway...but I would much rather leave the experience of God open...open for a multitude of different ways of Sacred experience...rather than claim to have it all figured out!

The New York Times this morning, had a piece about a reporter who traveled thousands of miles to Japan, taking three different kinds of transportation up into the mountains north of Kyoto to spend a few nights at a Buddhist retreat... She wanted to see if she could know something of the Divine in the silence and beauty and meditation of the place. Now days, you can read comments of others who have gone where you are going and this reporter found it amusing to read that one said he didn't find it a Holy Experience at all because sleeping on the mat on the floor was too hard and you could hear people snoring through the paper-thin walls! It seems Buddhist monasteries are trying to balance their own continuing practice...with opening up their spaces to tourists!

God put Moses into a cleft in a rock for his Holy Experience. You may remember wonderful rock crevices along the New England coast, or maybe you are thinking of big boulders found in the woods around here... used to build wonderful stone walls that snake through the landscape and remind us of the farms of long ago. These stones must have made good hiding places when you were children?

Moses looks through a boulder and catches a Holy glimpse. God talks to him yet maintains an unknowable-ness. Theologians talk about this immanence of God...a Holy up-close feeling that we sometimes have....and at the same time, a sense of transcendence...of something way out beyond that we cannot yet fully grasp. You know I love this!

Dag Jammarskjold wrote these words, "God does not die when we cease to believe in a personal deity, but we die on the day when our lives cease to be illuminated by

the steady radiance, renewed daily, of a *wonder*, the source of which is beyond all reason."

God... beyond all reason...and yet perhaps is the reason for our living!

This mystery of the beyond yet with the capacity for intimate relationship...is what makes having faith at all, so intriguing!

Perhaps we push God too far out there sometimes....the man up in the sky, or the essence of life-force in the universe out there, or some creative bang that started all life but is no more...these images do not seem conducive to a God with whom we can respond.

At the same time, a kind of personal bargaining-God...if you give me this, I will do that...begging for material things, or siding with God against others...this kind of relationship does not seem appropriate either.

How do you bring this together...the transcendent, the majesty and awe of God, with the immanent, close and personal...the One with whom you can talk through prayer and music and compassion for others?

John Goldingay writes that the word for "presence" *panim*, means "face." A person's face tells us that the person is with us... Yet Moses was not allowed to see God's face...and how might you imagine it anyway? Is it light, is it goodness, is it beauty...is it eyes filled with compassion? Is it male or female? It is simply love and warmth? Is it somehow that life-force within all living creatures that also yearns for connection?

I have been listening to a series of short talks by Jane Goodall...the woman who spent years studying chimpanzees in Gambe, Tanzania, Africa. She is a beautiful teacher. She said that scientists in her early years taught that humans were the only ones who had feelings and could share emotions. She learned this was not true at all. Chimpanzees grieve deeply at the loss of family members, she also saw them act out of kindness and thoughtfulness as when a little chimp ushered his baby brother away from an area where he knew there were many ticks. There are countless stories of goodness and compassion in the animal world... many of you know this in your own pets... might they be reflections of a greater Divine Love?

Goodall tells how chimpanzees have a sense of humor...the little ones, tease and play...She told about a chimpanzee who had been trained to use sign language and could sign many words accurately including the names for colors. When one trainer was going through colors with a particular little girl chimp, she was asked to name the

color of a white scarf. The chimp signed "red." The trainer was surprised at this error and kept asking..."What color is this scarf?" The chimp kept signing *red*. Finally the trainer asked why? The chimp grinned and picked off a tiny piece of red fluff from the white scarf and signed, RED! Then the chimp laughed...a big toothy laugh the way only chimps can laugh!!!

Goodness, humor, love and compassion...these are traits in the animal world and in our world, too, that very well may be reflections of God-with-us!

Let's not leave Moses in the cleft of the rock...God's hand is removed and Moses catches just a back-sided glimpse of some kind of glory that continues to remain an intriguing, engaging and life-enhancing mystery for us all.

I close with Meister Eckart from the 14<sup>th</sup> century who said, "God is in all things, every single creature is full of God...If I spent enough time with the tiniest creature --- even a caterpillar---I would never have to prepare a sermon..." So I will stop this one...and invite each of us to open our eyes to the glory of God revealed in a multitude of ways! Let us rejoice and live our lives with this hope and this eternal blessing! Amen.